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Global Agenda for Dialogue among Civilizations

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Report of the Secretary-General

Summary

The present report has been prepared pursuant to General Assembly resolution 56/6 of 9 November 2001 entitled "Global Agenda for Dialogue among Civilizations", in which the Assembly requested the Secretary-General to report to the Assembly at its sixtieth session on the implementation of the Global Agenda and Programme of Action.

This report reviews the activities undertaken by Member States and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), among others. It outlines a suggestion for a way forward in the dialogue. This dialogue would require a global partnership of all who cherish diversity and can be achieved by: (a) securing commitment of Governments; (b) mobilizing the role models in our societies; (c) changing shared narratives to reflect the increased interdependence among peoples, societies and individuals, in particular youth; and (d) focusing on the hearts and minds of the supporters and potential supporters of extremism.

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Introduction

1. The General Assembly, by its resolution 53/22 of 4 November 1998, had proclaimed the year 2001 as the United Nations Year of Dialogue among Civilizations. In its resolution 55/23 of 13 November 2000, the Assembly requested the Secretary-General to submit to it at its fifty-sixth session a substantive report on the prospect of dialogue among civilizations and the activities pertaining to the United Nations Year of Dialogue among Civilizations (A/56/523). The present report has been prepared pursuant to Assembly resolution 56/6 of 9 November 2001, entitled "Global Agenda for Dialogue among Civilizations", in which the Assembly requested the Secretary-General to report to it at its sixtieth session on the implementation of the Global Agenda and Programme of Action.

2. In recent years, the Global Agenda for Dialogue among Civilizations has engendered progressively greater interest from Member States, academic institutions, non-governmental organizations and international and regional institutions. Within the context of General Assembly resolution 56/6, the Secretariat has received information on the implementation of the Global Agenda for Dialogue among Civilizations from the following Member States: Albania, Argentina, Armenia, Austria, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Bulgaria, China, Cuba, Democratic People's Republic of Korea, Egypt, Finland, Germany, Iran (Islamic Republic of), Japan, Kazakhstan, Latvia, Lebanon, Malaysia, Mexico, Morocco, Philippines, Republic of Korea, Russian Federation, Switzerland, Syrian Arab Republic, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Turkey, Ukraine, United States of America and Venezuela (Bolivarian Republic of); and the following Observer State: Holy See (see annex).

3. The information provided suggests that the Global Agenda for Dialogue among Civilizations has been a key initiative in the promotion of greater understanding among people around the world through organizing activities such as study tours, cultural festivals, educational exchange programmes, joint scientific research projects and conferences. These activities also contribute to the wider development of a culture of peace as welcomed in General Assembly resolution 59/142 of 15 December 2004.

4. Following the proposals of the Prime Ministers of Spain and Turkey, the "Alliance of Civilizations" was launched on 14 July 2005 by the Secretary-General. This initiative aims to address the need for a committed effort by the international community — at both the institutional and civil society levels — to bridge divides and overcome the prejudice, misconceptions, misperceptions and polarization that potentially threaten world peace.

5. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) has contributed substantially to implementing the Global Agenda for Dialogue among Civilizations by explicitly including it in its medium-term strategy for 2002-2007 with a view to achieving its strategic objective of "safeguarding cultural diversity and encouraging dialogue among cultures and civilizations". Within this framework, UNESCO has organized and sponsored a broad range of activities, summits, conferences, colloquiums and other meetings.

Activities of UNESCO relating to the Global Agenda for Dialogue among Civilizations

6. UNESCO considers actions relating to the Global Agenda for Dialogue among Civilizations, including cultures and peoples, to be a key priority. The outcomes of its activities in this area thus far suggest an emerging consensus on an overarching framework for effective dialogue-related activities. The framework consists of universally shared values cutting across all cultures and civilizations, especially tolerance, respect for the other, mutual understanding and observance of human rights and democratic governance. The major challenge is to translate pledges to adhere to these values into concrete action through a variety of practical initiatives.

7. To this end, the General Conference of UNESCO at its thirty-second session adopted resolution 32 C/47 entitled "New perspectives in UNESCO's activities pertaining to the dialogue among civilizations including in particular follow-up to the New Delhi Ministerial Conference", which provides the prevailing framework within UNESCO for action in this area. The resolution emphasized that UNESCO should focus its efforts on actions at the regional and subregional levels, in order to involve a broad range of stakeholders beyond governmental representatives, and on practical action on certain thematic issues, particularly:

- Education, especially through the pursuit of the six Education for All (EFA) goals and efforts to promote quality education.
- The sciences and technology, including the role of traditional and local knowledge systems.
- Cultural diversity in all its dimensions, including world heritage.
- The media and information and communication technologies (ICT).

8. UNESCO has introduced several new approaches and actions, including an emphasis on the need for multi-stakeholder involvement, including civil society, at various levels, as well as on the need to mobilize the entire range of UNESCO mechanisms and networks, from its field offices to its National Commissions, chairs and fellowships.

9. These new features were adopted by regionally centred symposia and conferences on the dialogue among civilizations. These were held in Sanaa (February 2004), on education and culture; Issyk-Kul, Kyrgyzstan (June 2004), on water and culture; and Hanoi (December 2004), on education and sustainable development.

10. UNESCO has accorded special attention to South-Eastern Europe in respect of promoting concrete dialogue-related activities at the highest political levels. Following a regional summit in Ohrid, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, in August 2003, a further regional summit was organized in December 2004 in Tirana on inter-religious and inter-ethnic dialogue, where participants agreed on a framework for future action in the area of inter-religious dialogue, aimed at exchanges and interaction among individuals and groups of different cultural and religious backgrounds, with a view to creating new platforms for harmonious coexistence and generating new responses to recognized mutual interests and common needs. The two regional summits were followed by another summit on

cultural corridors, held in May 2005 in Varna, Bulgaria. A further summit will be convened in Croatia.

11. UNESCO has initiated with DaimlerChrysler an innovative new public-private partnership entitled "Mondialogo", which promotes intercultural dialogue and exchange and offers an entry point for concrete action with and by young people. Mondialogo encompasses a School Contest, an Engineering Award and an interactive Internet portal. Through the portal, participating teams from different cultures and continents are paired to learn about each other and to engage in joint projects, which are then juried by a group of well-known international personalities. With respect to the worldwide Mondialogo Engineering Award, 21 project teams were recently rewarded in Berlin, for having produced practical engineering proposals designed to help reduce poverty and promote sustainable development in developing countries.

12. To strengthen inter-agency and inter-organizational cooperation, a new multi-organization initiative entitled "Fostering Dialogue among Cultures and Civilizations through Concrete and Sustained Action" has been agreed upon, on a pilot basis, by UNESCO, the Islamic Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (ISESCO), the Arab League Educational, Cultural and Scientific Organization (ALECSO), the Organization of the Islamic Conference, the Danish Centre for Culture and Development (DCCD), Copenhagen and the Anna Lindh Euro-Mediterranean Foundation for the Dialogue between Cultures (Alexandria, Egypt). An international conference co-organized and co-financed by the partners was held in Rabat, Morocco, from 14 to 16 June 2005, bringing together educationalists, journalists, artists, writers, specialized non-governmental organizations, religious and spiritual leaders, scientists, engineers and various technical experts. The conference developed an action plan for implementing the dialogue through education ,ulture, the sciences, communication and information within the framework of the regular workplans of the organizations concerned.

13. To launch a broader reflection on the future challenges, dimensions and components of an effective dialogue-based activity programme, UNESCO organized, on 5 April 2005, an International Conference on the Dialogue among Civilizations at its headquarters in Paris. Another conference, entitled "Dialogue among Civilizations: Islam and the West", was held from 6 to 8 May 2005 in Quebec, Canada, under the auspices of UNESCO and Laval University with the participation of the Agence universitaire de la Francophonie and the Canadian Commission for UNESCO. Furthermore, UNESCO is also actively contributing to efforts of the United Nations undertaken jointly with regional organizations to advance practical dialogue activities in various regions of the world.

14. For its part, ISESCO in partnership with other organizations and institutions held a number of pertinent conferences to improve the culture of dialogue among civilizations and explore new theoretical and practical inputs for strengthening this culture as a prevailing discourse among nations.

Observations

15. The call for dialogue among civilizations has had many different responses from Governments and civil society, and from different parts of the world. There has clearly been no specific coordination among the many initiatives taken within the framework of the dialogue but, equally clearly, the call was perceived by many, across many divides, as one that had to be heeded.

16. Indeed, many people saw the events of 2001 as giving new relevance and urgency to the call for dialogue, which appeared to be a proper reply to terrorism and to those small minorities that, believing themselves to be in sole possession of the truth, had taken it upon themselves to try to set the world agenda. As a result, there are now many more people committed to pursuing the approach of inter-civilizational dialogue than there were when the call was first heard, and this approach has become very much part of the international discourse.

17. Yet the need for a response to terrorism was by no means the only factor that made the call for dialogue so timely. At a deeper level, this call is a response to the increased and multifaceted interdependence of peoples and countries, and also to the "asymmetry" of a globalized world in which not only can the large influence the small but the small can influence the large as well — a world in which we affect each other, for better or for worse, in many different spheres, including the environment, health, economy, finance, culture and security. In all these areas of human activity, it has become abundantly clear that the actions of small entities, or even of single individuals, can have an impact on people living on the other side of the globe. How, then, can we deny the need for a dialogue between different regions and civilizations?

18. In the first report of the Secretary-General to the General Assembly on the Global Agenda for Dialogue among Civilizations, which was issued on 9 November 2000 (A/55/492/Rev.1 and Corr.1), it was stressed that the dialogue needed to be pursued as one between those who perceived diversity as a threat and those who saw it as a way to growth and betterment. It is this operative divide that seems to engender intolerance, polarization, enmity and conflict. To achieve dialogue across the divide — between those who claim that their own particular group has sole knowledge of the truth, on one side, and those who welcome and cherish diversity, on the other — may not always be possible, at any rate in the short term. Before such an endeavour is embarked upon, it is necessary to bring together all those within all cultures, religions, ethnic groups and nationalities on that side of the divide where diversity is perceived as an element of that "larger freedom" of which the founders of the United Nations spoke in the Preamble to the Charter of the United Nations, and within which "better standards of life" should be attainable by all.

19. In the view of the Secretary-General, the most urgent task is to devise a strategy through which to create a coalition of all those peoples who do not believe in inciting violence or support extremism — and who surely make up the great majority of humankind. The shaping of such a coalition is not an easy task, nor is it assured of success, but it is a task definitely worth pursuing. The alternative is to yield to polarization and perpetual confrontation — in effect, to allowing the extremists to set the agenda. The Alliance of Civilizations

initiative, which hopefully will receive the support not only of Governments, but also of regional organizations and civil society, appears to be the appropriate forum within which to devise such a strategy.

20. Movement towards such a coalition must be driven by a new narrative in international relations. Such a narrative would be based on the historical reality of continuous interaction among civilizations at the local, national and international levels, and of many societies where people of different cultures and religions have worked successfully together. It would recognize that confrontation is being pursued only by small (though determined) minorities. This narrative, in other words, would encompass aspirations for the future rather than the scars of the past; inclusion rather than the paradigm of "us and them"; a win-win paradigm rather than a zero-sum game.

21. Many of today's narratives tend to suggest that identity is best defined and protected through a process of exclusion. Indeed, globalization has generated an even stronger need than in the past to underline one's own identity as distinct and separate from others. The new narrative that is proposed may seem to run counter to this trend, and to thwart the genuine need felt by most to preserve those characteristics that make us individually distinct from one another. Yet, in reality, one does not suppress one's identity by entering into dialogue. Rather, dialogue implies a difference between interlocutors from the start, and is thus a way of ensuring that the narrative of globalization can include the diverse identities of all participants.

22. If it is to bear fruit, dialogue among civilizations, like many ideas of global significance, needs to be pursued at a very local level. Many societies provide examples of microcosms of civilizations that span the globe. The challenge is therefore to establish a dialogue within the confines of individual cities and countries, as well as to engage in dialogue across national and other boundaries. It is perhaps at this level that the *lack* of a real dialogue, between ethnically and culturally different groups sharing the same nationality, has recently proved most dangerous. When members of a particular group become prisoners of a narrative of confrontation, a special responsibility falls on other members of the same group sharing the same culture, religion and values to convince them of the validity of a different narrative. Each culture has to develop its own narrative, within its own boundaries, even while realizing that its own behaviour can make the task easier or harder for those in other cultures seeking to do the same.

23. The hearts and minds of the next generation are the real object of a dialogue among civilizations. This means that new narratives, if they are to catch on, need to be validated by individuals who can inspire the young, and fire their imagination. These individuals — the role models of our societies — need to be mobilized by the international community. They can be found in different social sectors: sport, entertainment, the media, science, education, business. They need to be encouraged to take on an advocacy role.

24. A global partnership of all who cherish diversity can be achieved by securing the commitment of Governments, by mobilizing the role models in our societies, by fostering shared narratives of societies that reflect the increasing interdependence among peoples, groups and individuals, and by focusing on the real objective, which is to reach the hearts and minds of the supporters and

potential supporters of the extremists — those who claim sole possession of the truth, believing that they alone know how to live, what to be and what to do, and that those who differ from them are — to paraphrase Isaiah Berlin — not merely mistaken but wicked or mad, and need restraining or suppressing.

25. Such a partnership, forged in this spirit, can be a powerful tool for confronting the belief in "diversity as a threat" which, in the last few years, has caused the tragic, unnecessary deaths of so many people in so many parts of the world.

26. The call for dialogue has planted its seeds in a resistant terrain but the seeds have not died. The strategy that has been outlined — comprising global partnership, role models, shared narratives and focus on the hearts and minds of the young — suggests a way forward.

Annex

Response of Member and Observer States and civil society organizations and United Nations bodies to the request contained in General Assembly resolution 56/6 of 9 November 2001 entitled "Global Agenda for Dialogue among Civilizations"[a]

1. A note verbale dated 26 April 2005 was sent by the United Nations Secretariat to Permanent Missions to the United Nations pursuant to the request contained in General Assembly resolution 56/6 of 9 November 2001, entitled "Global Agenda for Dialogue among Civilizations", that States, international and regional organizations and civil society report their activities on developing appropriate means to further promote dialogue and mutual understanding among civilizations to the Secretary-General.

2. The following Member States and Observer State have submitted reports:

Albania, Argentina, Armenia, Austria, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Bulgaria, China, Cuba, Democratic People's Republic of Korea, Egypt, Finland, Germany, Holy See, Iran (Islamic Republic of), Japan, Kazakhstan, Latvia, Lebanon, Malaysia, Mexico, Morocco, Philippines, Republic of Korea, Russian Federation, Switzerland, Syrian Arab Republic, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Turkey, Ukraine, United States of America, Venezuela (Bolivarian Republic of).

3. The following civil society organizations and United Nations bodies contributed to the present report:

International Movement for a Just World, Organization of the Islamic Conference, University of Pretoria, South Africa, Centre for World Dialogue, Gaddafi International Foundation for Charity Associations, Federation for World Peace, Islamic Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, Organisation internationale de la Francophonie, United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the United Nations Secretariat.

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[a] The contributions of Member States can be retrieved from the Office for Economic and Social Council Support and Coordination of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the Secretariat.